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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: EFFORT TO LAUNCH OMAN'S FIRST HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) An aspiring activist intent on establishing Oman's first human rights center has been invited to discuss his proposal with the Ministry of Social Development. In an effort to obtain government registration, Abdullah bin Salem al-Barami solicited the Embassy for support, saying that the public's lack of awareness and understanding of their civil rights demands the establishment of such an organization. End Summary.

CAN WE TALK?

2. (SBU) An aspiring human rights activist, Mr. Abdullah bin Salem al-Barami, wrote an impassioned letter to the Ambassador requesting assistance in establishing a human rights center in Oman. Al-Barami, a businessman and military veteran who hails from Oman's southern Dhofar region, said that "as the one who saved Europe from the barbarism of the Nazis and Fascists," America needs to present its "beautiful" image to the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore, al-Barami said that assisting Oman in establishing a human rights center would be serving mutual interests and strengthening friendly ties between the two countries. While al-Barami is currently on the board of directors of his family's successful business venture, Al-Barami Group of Companies, he appears serious in taking on this additional mantle.

OUTLINING HR CONCERNS

3. (SBU) Emboffs met with al-Barami October 23 to discuss his proposal for establishing a human rights center in Oman. He spoke about the many injustices he perceives in Omani society and the public's lack of awareness of their civil rights. His criticisms included the "just for show" Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), discrimination in the workforce, restricted civil rights (example of government approval for Omanis to marry non-Omani citizens), controlled press (no critical reporting and limited newspaper selection), the problem of elitism (according to al-Barami 50 families monopolize the Omani economy), and the overcrowded universities.

4. (SBU) On the subject of universities, al-Barami appeared personally offended by the USD20 million pricetag for the construction of Sultan Qaboos University, a school that accommodates only 2000 students per year. He also criticized the cost of Dhofar University (DU). The only university in the region, DU barely accommodates 1000 students and charges over USD7500 per year. (Note: The average cost of tuition in Oman is USD7500 for most private schools. End Note.) Al-Barami said that 40,000 to 50,000 students graduate secondary school each year with ambitions of furthering their education. He asked, "How can we expect families to afford sending even one kid to university?" More importantly, al-Barami said that the fundamental lack of access to higher education paves the way for terrorism. Young students will be listening to "fundamentalist" rhetoric instead of university lectures.

MINISTRY WILLING TO DISCUSS

5. (SBU) Al-Barami seemed convinced that without vocal support from the United States, the Ministry of Social Development will deny registration to a human rights organization. Emboffs reminded al-Barami that it is usually a lengthy and tedious process for any non-governmental organization (NGO) to become registered in Oman. While the U.S. clearly supports human rights efforts, al-Barami he may find it difficult to garner material support for an organization that does not formally exist. Emboffs also offered suggestions to assist al-Barami in pursuing his ambition, including visiting successful local NGOs, reaching out to other embassies that also support human rights,

contacting international organizations, and, most importantly, applying for registration with the Ministry of Social Development. Many NGOs in the process of seeking registration are still able to carry out substantial work in their fields.

16. (SBU) Al-Barami notified us November 28 that, in response to his letter, the Ministry of Social Development has invited al-Barami to Muscat to discuss his proposal. Poloff will meet again with al-Barami and facilitate meetings with local NGOs who have been through the lengthy registration process.

Comment

17. (SBU) Al-Barami is a serious and determined individual who is articulating some commonly heard complaints. Apparently around 50 years old, he is a veteran of the provincial guard forces the Sultan created to battle the communist-backed Dhofar rebellion in the 1970's, as well as of the Royal Air Force of Oman. He indicated that he was presenting his proposal to us on behalf of like-minded colleagues in Dhofar and elsewhere in the Sultanate, primarily composed of former military and professional people (doctors, engineers, educators and business people). His ambition to create a human rights center strikes us as sincere, and we will closely monitor further developments and, where appropriate, provide advice and assistance.

BALTIMORE